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CELIBACY IN THE MODERN CHURCH

BY

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It must strike the casual observer strange, if not incongruous, that the purely internal disciplinary question of clerical celibacy should generate such massive concern both within and without the confines of the Catholic Church. There is something very unsettling about Christian celibacy being made the subject of ecclesiastical harangue and secular scorn. On the other hand, it is also reassuring to see members of the Church and even the unchurched caught up in the interest generated by the celibacy crisis. After all, the whole point in choosing, under the influence of divine grace, a celibate life indicates precisely that there is more to come beyond the land of pilgrims and strangers! A witness to a life style that is neither seen nor acknowledged is useless! A witness to a life style that is merely tolerated is useless! It should not strike any thoughtful person as particularly odd at all that in a time which sees human life held so cheaply on almost all fronts and human love shared so superficially, celibate love is either scorned or compromised under the guise of human dignity and freedom.

Erich Fromm observes:

> Man is alienated. He is out of touch with himself and others. Alienation pervades the relationship of

man, to his work, to that which he consumes, to the State, to himself. He views himself as a commodity. He is unhappy and unhealthy.[1]

For Erich Fromm the basis for productive living is love but he writes:

> Today everything is more important than love. Everything is more pressing, success, money, education. Almost all of education is dedicated to learning these goals (success, earning money) and almost no learning is relegated to learn the art of loving. Love requires knowledge and effort; it is an art. As an art it necessitates mastery of theory and practice.[2]

Rod McKuen, in his poem "An Outstretched Hand," says:

> Each of us was made by God
> And some of us grew tall
> Others stood out in the wind
> Their branches bent and fell
> Those of us who walk in light
> Must help the ones in darkness up
> For that's what life is all about
> And love is all there is to life.

"Gaudium et Spes," in paragraph 25, Documents of Vatican II, states:

> Man's social nature makes it evident that the progress of the human person and the advance of society itself hinge on each other. The subject and goal of all social institutions is and must be the human person, which for its part and by its very nature stands completely in need of social life. Hence, through his dealings with others, through reciprocal duties, and through fraternal dialogue he develops all his gifts and is able to rise to his destiny.[3]

This outlook of Vatican II is a very profound outlook on the interrelationship of man and society. The message is clear. A man who co-exists with others must love. Man is not totally independent but to exist he must co-exist.

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[1]Erich Fromm, The Sane Society (New York: Holt, Rinehart, Winston, 1955), p. 111.

[2]Ibid., pp. 241-243.

[3]The Documents of Vatican II, ed. Walter Abbott, (New York: Guild Press, 1966), p. 32.

In preparing this paper I interviewed some people and asked them to define love. Here are some of the replies:

"Love is a mystery, but one I would like to solve." (Teenage Male)

"Love. . . Well love is having relations, I guess." (23 year old Male)

"Love is trust and giving to one another." (Newlyweds)

"Love is oneness of thought and feeling, in life with another." (Protestant Chaplain)

So love is a many-splendored thing. As the clean, suave hair-styled young man in a Playboy cartoon says to the rumpled, disarrayed girl he is passionately embracing: "Why speak of love at a time like this?"[4] To live in society as a full person man must love and he must love well!! Man must always find time to love. A time for loving means to a Christian something besides friendship and marriage. It includes, it demands, also the charismatic gift of celibate love. The most persuasive life of love this world has known occurred in the virile heart of a Jesus Christ who was celibate. Many who lived in the time of Jesus might have preferred a married Messiah. The New Testament refers to the virginity of Mary and the celibacy of Christ. There has never been a time in the history of the Church when celibate love was not proposed as an ideal.

So the Church was yet in the process of apostolic formation when the scripture was written. Scripture speaks

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[4]Harvey Cox, The Secular City (New York: MacMillan Company), p. 73.

of a Jesus who did not marry although his culture expected this of him. Scripture includes in its canon the words of St. Paul by which, in the power of the spirit, he counsels celibate love.[5] According to Biblical scholar Lucien Legrand, St. Paul believed that "Celibacy is not an act of panic but an act of faith in the Lord's death and resurrection. Celibacy is a gift from God."[6] St. Paul considers virginity preferable to marriage.[7] He believes that "the celibate can give undivided attention to the things of the Lord if he is free of family life." I do believe that there is a new spirit in the Church which causes this writer to respectfully reconsider the words of St. Paul who believed that married people had to be of a "divided heart".

The famous Vatican II Document "The Church In the Modern World," says:

> Christ the Lord abundantly blessed this many faceted love, welling up as it does from the fountain of Divine Love. Authentic married love is caught up into Divine Love and is governed and enriched by Christ's redeeming love so that this love may lead the spouses to God with powerful effect. They are penetrated with the spirit of Christ, which permeates their whole lives.[8]

This symphonic declaration, of which but a small segment appears here, is a modern Song of Songs. It quietly, but absolutely, turns the Church away from a clouded view of marriage and sexuality. Marriage, for the longest time, was considered the slow train to heaven and virginity an express. Obviously, these

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[5] 1 Cor. 7

[6] 1 Cor. 7:7

[7] 1 Cor. 7:7, 8, 26

[8] "The Church In The Modern World," Documents of Vatican II, Sections 47-52, ed. Walter Abbott, (New York: Guild Press, 1970).

sublimities now perceived in the marriage context are not automatically realized in actual married life. The Council statement affirms rich, real possibilities of a sort formally reserved to the celibate situation. Therein lies the revolutionary nature of the position of Vatican II.

In Matthew Chapter 19 vs 1-10, Christ is instructing the Apostles about marriage and divorce. He is restoring marriage to its original integrity. In verse 12 he speaks of "eunuchs who have made themselves that way for the sake of the kingdom of Heaven. Let anyone accept this who can."[9] The voluntary eunuchs do then for the kingdom what a merchant does in search of fine pearls: finding one of great value, he goes, sells all that he has and buys it. The voluntary eunuch is like a man who finds a treasure hidden in the field. He is happy so he goes sells all that he has and buys the field. Christ is drawing attention to the working of a new religious experience based on the internal logic of the claims of the kingdom. Some find that seized by the urgency of the Kingdom Witness they willingly forgo married life because their heart is where their treasure is. Christ, apparently, had in mind those among his disciples who like him have opted to stay as a requirement for the Kingdom. His words indicate that voluntary celibacy has been from the beginning of the New Age a religious Fact resulting from the obvious primacy taken by the grace of the Kingdom.

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[9]Matt. 19:12 (TJB). /TJB: The Jerusalem Bible/

Humanly speaking it would be sheer stupidity to say that marriage is the only possible fulfillment and that celibacy leads to despair. It would be just as dangerous as the contrary opinion of St. Jerome who saw marriage as a kind of disgrace. Marriage is, and always will be, the most natural way to a certain kind of fulfillment. Celibacy can be, and indeed is, another way to fulfillment. It all depends on each person, according to his own personality and his resources for establishing positive relationships, will draw from the situation in which he is. Celibacy loses its meaning only when it does not become a way to love; such "celibacy" is mere juridical celibacy; it cannot inspire Christians to love Christ and love one another; in fact it often does the reverse. The priest who accepts the gift of celibacy must accept it because there is Christ and because there is love. Someone who is celibate merely to perform a function or, perhaps to escape the demands of marital love or responsible living, is legally celibate but not charismatically celibate.

Surely the maturity required for the life of the consecrated celibate is the same maturity required for married life. The celibate who is mature does not displace sexuality; he does not displace his social nature but accepts it and attempts to live a fulfilled life. Without getting lost in a purely fictitious and imaginary ideal, we can suggest the personality traits of the mature celibate, male or female. Naturally, there will be weaknesses of character, reactions which are not perfectly adjusted moments which are less serene. Ideal human balance in marriage or celibacy is never fully and definitely

achieved once and for all. They enjoy a well established basic emotional security. They are sure of themselves but not in the pejorative sense that this expression can suggest. Rather they are sure of who they are and are satisfied to be themselves. This attitude is built on a calm and honest appraisal of both their potentialities and their limitations. This implies a good sense of humor, a real sense of detachment is looking at oneself, taking oneself realistically but not too seriously or tragically. All of these characteristics must indeed be present in those who hope to get some mileage out of marriage. He is young whatever age he is. He refuses to become trapped in any philosophical, political or relational systems as if it were an immutable framework which he needs to balance his own needs. There is a sharp contrast when they are compared to "old fogies" or "old maids." The mature celibate is generally very active and has many contacts and varied relationships. They are people who are involved in various aspects of human life.

I believe that the late Secretary General of the United Nations, Dag Hammarskjöld, a rather mystical figure in his own right. pinpointed our dilemma about celibacy in the seventies when he wrote:

> 'Why,' you ask, 'deny yourself something which does nobody else any harm and does you good?' Yes, why provided it does not conflict with the path you have chosen. Your subsequent reaction to your behavior when you have forgotten this proviso--as one reacts to a lie or a humiliating weakness--is sufficient answer to your question.[10]

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[10] Dag Hammarskjöld, Markings (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1966), p. 152.

Consecrated celibacy makes sense only to eyes that perceive, by faith, the vision of the kingdom that Christ has established and which has yet to be perfected in all of redeemed mankind. A celibate priesthood is a particular Christian reality that speaks, quite simply, as no other voice can, in holding out before men the ultimate purpose and meaning of human life with its frustrations, despairs and perennial "incompletes." As I said before, conflict should not be posed falsely in terms of the supposedly inherent superiority of virginity over marriage. The factor of irreconcilability should not be thought of in terms that would suggest a married priesthood would be ineffective in service and ministry. In the Eastern Church we have married clergy and our Protestant ministers in Christ all prove beyond any doubt that there is no basic dichotomy between marriage and priest witness. Celibacy, rather, integrates and points to the whole of what "priest" means and signifies within the framework of life on earth and life hereafter, and derives its value from its realization. Celibacy has never been more relevant to the preservation of eternal values, and the calling forth in all of us that which is best. Celibacy is not escape from something or someone. It's a notice to the world that man is essentially someone more than sexual being. Richard Egenter said:

> There is ultimately only one legitimate basic motive for consecrated celibacy. It is not a disparagement or a rejection of marriage and sex, not an angelic life in sense of a life lived in the spirit with the body and everything corporeal suppressed as much as possible, not the ascetic goal of complete mastery over the sexual drives, but solely the Lord and his kingdom.[11]

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[11] Richard Egenter, Celibacy and Virginity (Dublin, 1968), p. 89.

Karl Rahner has pointed out that celibacy is: "Arduous, challenging and enriching. It is an experience which includes also response, mystery, acceptance of pain and renunciation."[12]

Unless there was Christ, Christians would not be inspired by celibacy. Because there was Christ, they know that a Church which has lost its sensitivity to celibate love has actually lost Christ in a vital way. A Church which limits its expression of Christian love to marriage is a Church which has lost the fullness of the Spirit's life. Celibacy makes ultimate sense to a Christian when it is situated in a context of the absoluteness of Life and Love. The religious Jew of Christ's day saw in marriage an abiding symbol of life and love. Jesus knew this yet he spoke of a type of life and manner of love offered to those whose radical discipleship caused them to leave husband and wife, children and home.

Celibacy, unlike marriage, is not bound closely to cultural styles of life. It is less institutional, less sacramental than marriage. It is charism, almost pure charism, given to a believing community so that its faith in Christ may be made vital and so that its belief in life and love may never falter.

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[12]Karl Rahner, Servants of the Lord (London, 1967), p. 151.

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